

Public Works Committee
Tuesday, May 4, 2010
Town Room, Town Hall

Attendance:

Committee: Steve Braun (chair), Charlie Moran, Michael Cann, Vince O'Connor, Rob Crowner;
absent: Donald George.

Town staff: Guilford Mooring (DPW), Christine Brestrup (Planning)

Guests: Jason Venditti (UMass Facilities Planning), Joseph Wanat (VHB engineer).

Members of other boards and the general public: Denise Barberet, Nonny Burack, Allan Carpenter, Barbara Carpenter, Hope Crolius, Aaron Hayden, Alan Snow, Fran Van Treese, Jim Wald, and one other.

1. Administrative matters: Steve calls the meeting to order at 7:02pm. The committee unanimously approves the minutes of the April meeting.

2. Conceptual plan public hearing: North Pleasant Street/Governor's Drive/Eastman Lane intersection.

Background: The DPW has had ongoing discussions with UMass about improving traffic conditions on public roads on campus. This is the first chance to collaborate on a project, with jurisdiction over the intersection in question being shared. Jason Venditti is the project manager for UMass; Joseph Wanat represents VHB, the design firm hired to develop the conceptual plan.

The intersection is a known bottleneck, peaking at morning rush hour with the most problematic movement southbound on North Pleasant Street, and a larger peak at afternoon rush hour with the most problematic movement eastbound on Governor's Drive. Additionally, there is no "gateway" feel to the intersection despite that it is the north entrance to campus. The utility work being done at the northern end of campus presents an opportunity to address these issues.

Traffic studies were done before the infrastructure work started, including turning counts, pedestrian and bicycle counts, and desire line analysis. The options that were evaluated were: (a) rebuild the intersection as it was before; (b) enhanced signal, with a new right turn lane southbound on North Pleasant and a new left turn lane eastbound on Governor's Drive; and (c) single-lane roundabout. All data are available on the town website in the Functional Design Report.

Preferred option design features: A single-lane roundabout was determined to be the preferred option after considering vehicle traffic efficacy, large-vehicle maneuverability, pedestrian and bicycle safety, environmental factors, and long-term cost. A roundabout is about 1/6 the size of a rotary and is designed to restrict speeds to 20mph. There would be a raised crosswalk/speed table (though not a "bump" such as on College Street at Amherst College) at each approach, with drivers compelled to deflect or veer to the right before engaging the roundabout. Entering traffic yields to circulating traffic and pedestrians and bicycles maintain right-of-way. The volume of traffic at the intersection (16,000 vehicles per day or vpd) is well below the standard capacity for a roundabout (25,000vpd). Level-of-service and queue measures are similar between the roundabout and enhanced signal option, but travel delay is significantly reduced with a roundabout.

Safety, environmental, and cost features: The roadway is banked out rather than in to facilitate drainage and snow clearance, creating a centrifugal force that slows drivers. The design forces drivers and pedestrians to pay attention. Gaps in traffic are easier to gauge because of speed and size. Vehicles

are traveling in only one direction. There are no red lights to run. Shorter pedestrian crossing distances because of fewer lanes and splitter islands. National data indicates significant reductions in total accidents and injuries in roundabouts versus traditional intersections. Minimization of start-and-stop cycles leads to reductions in emissions, fuel consumption, and noise. Pavement can be reduced by ten to fifteen percent, allowing for more non-asphalt area. Initial construction costs are similar between a traditional intersection and a roundabout, but ongoing maintenance for a roundabout is much easier and cheaper due to the absence of traffic signals.

Concerns and comments: (Vince O'Connor) Bicyclists do not travel through the intersection at even 15mph, creating a hazard to 20mph traffic. (Response) Entering cars will actually come close to stopping, making effective speeds less than 20mph.

(Vince O'Connor) Conflict points are all in play constantly with a roundabout, whereas many conflict points in a traditional intersection are eliminated by the signal cycle. (Charlie Moran) Bicyclists would need to look only to the left rather than all around when entering the roundabout.

(Aaron Hayden) The design of the crosswalk forces pedestrians to pay attention by making them turn to face traffic. (Vince O'Connor) The crosswalks along North Pleasant Street through campus have been effective in reducing speed; also, pedestrians tend to use them rather than jaywalk.

(Denise Barberet) Students do not cross the street in a coherent group but in a long continuous line, potentially causing bottlenecks in the roundabout. (Response) The data collection and modeling incorporated this condition.

(Vince O'Connor) Illustrations seem to show that bicycle lanes are cut off at the entrances to roundabouts. (Response) A ramp for bicyclists to mount and travel through the intersection on the sidewalk can be incorporated as a design option.

(Vince O'Connor) There is not really a safety problem at the intersection that needs to be solved. (Response) The roundabout is proposed primarily to reduce wait times and improve traffic flow through the intersection; safety data are provided to show that a roundabout does not increase safety problems.

(Hope Crolus, Public Shade Tree Committee) Is there a vegetation plan for the center of the roundabout? (Response) There is a need to maintain sight lines, so any vegetation will be low. The center will not be used for snow storage in winter; drainage will be situated on the outside of the roundabout.

(Nonny Burack) A decision should not be made on the basis of accommodating automobiles.

(Fran Van Treese, Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee) Concerned that it will not be safe or convenient for bicycles to traverse a roundabout. (Response) An education component will be needed. There will be pavement markings for bicycles.

(Allan Carpenter) A roundabout would complete the current (temporary) setup, which itself is an improvement over the previous design.

(Alan Snow, Tree Warden) Consider a tree for the center, as shown in one of the illustrations. It could help create a gateway effect. (Response) The landscape plan has not yet been done because it is still early in the process.

(Farview Way resident) Farview Way has been cut off by this project. Will it be linked to whatever design is approved? (Guilford Mooring) The Town will do Farview Way separately from the project at another time.

(Denise Barberet) Have pedestrian studies reflecting the explosion of cell phone/ipod use, texting, etc. been incorporated in intersection analysis and design? People just do not pay attention.

(Charlie Moran) What will the education campaign look like?

(Vince O'Connor) The university should promise to revert to an enhanced signal design at some point if it is determined that safety has been diminished by a roundabout. (Jason Venditti) The town owns the intersection, but the university is handling the expense of the project and has already

contributed in the form of relocation of utilities, etc. (Guilford Mooring) The Town is confident that a roundabout will work. The PWC can review conditions later and make a recommendation to change it if warranted. If the Select Board agrees, then a change can be made.

(Vince O'Connor) There are likely to be delays caused by timid or inexperienced drivers unable or unwilling to enter a roundabout. Emissions reductions would be obviated by drivers making a long detour through North Amherst.

(Vince O'Connor) There should be a continuous bike lane throughout the roundabout, as was insisted upon by the committee when it reviewed the double-roundabout planned for Atkins Corner.

(Vince O'Connor) The reverse-banked superelevation may cause accidents when drivers try to go through the roundabout too fast, such as during off-peak hours.

Next steps: Guilford states that the project review process will be modified for this project because it is farther along than what would be considered a 25% review. Comments will be solicited until May 19. The Public Works Committee will make a recommendation, if it chooses, at its next meeting on June 1. The proposal and comments would then be taken to the Select Board for a decision the following week. Jason states that it would be difficult to construct an enhanced-signal intersection before September 1, if that becomes the recommendation. A roundabout is effectively already partly underway, so it could be completed before classes resume in the Fall.

All project information and space to provide feedback is available on the town website at:
<<http://www.amherstma.gov/index.aspx?NID=1321&ART=3160&admin=1>>.

3. Meeting schedule: Guilford states that several projects are lined up awaiting an opportunity for public hearing: Spring Street, Sand Hill Road, and University Drive (Big Y intersection). The committee agrees to consider Spring Street in June and will probably meet again in July but not August.

4. Adjournment: The meeting is adjourned at 9:30pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Rob Crowner